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WAKONDAH;

THE MASTER OF LIFE.

A POEM.

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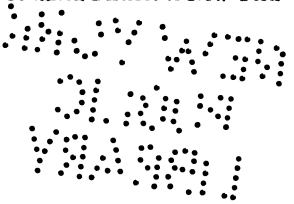

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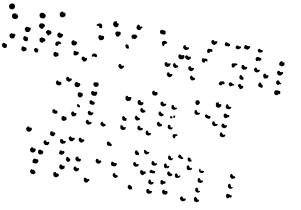
ADVERTISEMENT.

The following Poem (published contemporaneously in "Arcturus") is submitted without apology or preface. The author has but to await the grand inquest of Criticism which is to decide whether it has in it, life or death: and to avail himself of the opportunity, which he has reserved in the concluding stanza, of pursuing the subject, should the award favor such a purpose.

New-York, October 14, 1841.



WAKONDAH; THE MASTER OF LIFE.

"We have already noticed the superstitious feelings with which the Indians regard the Black Hills; but this immense range of mountains (the Chippewyan or Rocky Mountains) which divides all that they know of the world and gives birth to such mighty rivers, is still more an object of awe and veneration. They call it "The Crest of the World," and think that Wakondah or the Master of Life, as they designate the Supreme Being, has his residence among these aerial heights.—*Astoria, Vol. I., p.* 265.

WAKONDAH.

I.

The Moon ascends the vaulted sky to-night;
With a slow motion full of pomp ascends,
But mightier than the Moon that o'er it bends
A Form is dwelling on the mountain height
That boldly intercepts the struggling light—
With darkness nobler than the planet's fire:
A gloom and dreadful grandeur that aspire
To match the cheerful Heaven's far-shining might.

II.

Great God! how fearful to the gazing eye!
Behold the bow that o'er his shoulder hangs,
But ah! winged with what agonies and pangs
Must arrows from its sounding bow-string fly;—
An arc of death and warfare in the sky.
He plants a spear upon the rock that clangs
Like thunder; and a blood-red token hangs,
A death-dawn, on its point aspiring high.

III.

Upon his brow a garland of the woods he wears,
A crown of oak leaves broader than their wont;
Above his dark eye waves and dims its brunt—
Its feathers darker than a thousand Fears—
A cruel eagle's plume: High, high it rears,
Nor ever did the bird's rash youth surmount
A pitch of power like that o'ershadowed front
On which the plume its storm-like station bears.

IV.

Filled with the glory thus above him rolled—
  How would some Chinook wandering through the night
  In cedern helm and elk-skin armor dight
Be pierced with blank amazement dumb and cold:
How, fear-struck, scan the Spirit's awful mould;—
  The gloomy front, the death-dispelling eye,
  And bulk that swallows up the sea-blue sky—
Tall as the unconcluded tower of old.

V.

Transcendant Shape! But hark, for lo a sound
  Like that of rivers and of mingled winds
  Through forests raging 'till the tumult finds
Or makes an outlet free from hedge or bound,—
Breaks from the Holder of the mountain-ground.
  Oh, listen sadly to the urgent cry!—
  No mightier shadow of a strength gone by
Through the whole perishable Earth is found.

VI.

The Spirit lowers and speaks: "Tremble ye wild Woods!
Ye Cataracts! your organ-voices sound!
Deep Crags, in earth by massy tenures bound,
Oh, Earthquake, level flat! The peace that broods
Above this world and steadfastly eludes
Your power, howl Winds and break;—the peace that mocks
Dismay 'mid silent streams and voiceless rocks—
Through wildernesses, cliffs and solitudes.

VII.

"Night-shadowed Rivers—lift your dusky hands
And clap them harshly with a sullen roar!
Ye thousand Pinnacles and Steeps deplore
The glory that departs! Above you stands
Ye Lakes with azure waves and snowy strands,
A Power that utters forth his loud behest
Till mountain, lake and river shall attest
The puissance of a Master's large commands!"

VIII.

So spake the Spirit, with a wide-cast look
Of bounteous power and cheerful majesty;
As if he caught a sight of either sea
And all the subject realm between:—Then shook
His brandished arms, his stature scarce could brook,
Its confine; swelling wide, it seemed to grow
As grows a cedar on a mountain's brow
By the mad air in ruffling breezes took.

IX.

The woods are deaf and will not be aroused—
The mountains are asleep, they hear him not,
Nor from deep-founded silence can be wrought,
Tho' herded bison on their steeps have browsed:
Beneath their banks in darksome stillness housed
The rivers loiter like a calm-bound sea;
In anchored nuptials to dumb apathy
Cliff, wilderness and solitude are spoused.

X.

Then shone Wakondah's dreadful eyes,
  With fire and lurid splendor, like the stars
  That dazzle earth beholding them;—the wars
That noble spirits wage with enemies,
Flash in his aspect through its cloudy guise;—
  His tower-high stature quakes in all its parts,
  And from his brow a mighty sorrow starts—
A sorrow mightier than the midnight skies.

XI.

"Oh, wherefore tremble? Wherefore should I fear
  Because these creatures now, by chance, are dumb
  Nor longer to my bidding with obeisance come;
As when, in times to startle and revere,
Templed on high within this cloudy sphere,
  With wondering worship of the dusky wood—
  The quivered stream, the dark-eyed solitude—
I stamped my image on the rolling year.

XII.

" At eve or morn whene'er I walked these hills
From ridge to ridge they shook, from peak to peak ;
A thousand warrior tribes that dare not speak
Lay in my shadow with the awe that chills,
Dumb with the fear that boundless force instils.
Wakondah was a god and thunderer then,
Nor bent his bow nor launched his shafts in vain—
Lord of each power that terrifies or thrills.

XIII.

" Your dark foundations felt my framing hand ;
Nor can your sun-smote summits e'er forget
By whom their flood-resisting roots were set—
By whose clear skill their skyey power was planned.
Through all the borders of the lofty land—
Mountains ! I call upon you to attest
Whose habitable wish upon your crest
Reared up his throne and fixed his Godhead stand.

XIV.

"My spirit stretched itself from East to West,
With a winged terror or a mighty joy;
And, when his matchless bow-shafts would annoy,
I urged the dark red hunter in his quest
Of pard or panther with a gloomy zest,
And while through darkling woods they swiftly fare—
Two seeming creatures of the oak-shadowed air,
I sped the game and fired the follower's breast.

XV.

"Outsounding with my thunder thy loud vaunt,
Thou, too, hast known me, mighty Cataract!—
When rocks in headlong motion thou hast tracked,
Like some huge creature goaded from his haunt,
Along the mountain passes rough and slaunt—
Who makes his foaming way while all around
He awes the circuit with a shuddering sound:—
So ragest Thou and lift'st Thy sounding front!"

XVI.

Power crumbles from the arm, and from the brow
  Glory declines with surety swift as light:
  Like towers that loose in storms their woundrous might,
Dark principalities of air must bow
And have their strength and terror smitten low:
  The hour draws nigh, Wakondah, when on thine
  Yon full-orbed fire shall cease to shine
Uplifted longer in Heaven's western glow!

XVII.

"Lo! where our foe up through these vales ascends,
  Fresh from the embraces of the swelling sea,
  A glorious, white and shining Deity.
Upon our strength his deep blue eye he bends,
With threatenings full of thought and steadfast ends,
  While desolation from his nostril breathes,
  His glittering rage he scornfully unsheathes
And to the startled air its splendor lends.

XVIII.

"The nation-queller in their length of days—
The slaughterer of the tribes art thou! the rude
Remorseless, vengeful foe of natural blood
And wood-born strength reared up amid the maze
Of forest walks and unimprisoned ways;—
The dwellers in unsteepled wastes; the host
Of warriors stark and cityless, whose boast
Was daring, proof 'gainst torture that betrays."

XIX.

Oh wrestle not, Wakondah, with the Time;
The Time resistless in its present hour
Of rugged force, of multitudinous power
To make itself triumphant o'er the clime,
Where streams are endless, mountains as sublime
And valleys shadowy and calm as ever
Yet tasked a Godhead's high and bright endeavor,
Since first the world was in its mighty prime.

XX.

Far through the desert, see his fiery hoof
  Speeds like the pale white courser of St. John,
  With rage and dreadful uproar thundering on!
At every step old shadows fly aloof,
While on and on he bounds with strength enough
  To master valley, hill and echoing plain—
  Cheered by the outcry of a savage train
Of white-browed hunters armed in deadly proof.

XXI.

"Through the far shadows of the gathering years
  I see, visions denied to mortal eyes;
  Phantoms of dreadful aspect that arise
Cold with the anguish of their wintry fears;
And struggling forth from out a gulf of tears
  And blood by banded nations vainly shed,
  Above them all a single Wo its head
Lifts high and awes its customary peers.

XXII.

"I say not now what name that Wo shall bear,
What mournful omen on its front is written,
What pillared glories by its sad rage smitten—
Shall fall to earth, and all th' embracing air
With its dread sound of wasting tumult tear;
These are the future's—voiceless let them rest
Deep in the shadow of her silent breast,
'Till vengeance bid the sons of men—Prepare!"

XXIII.

So spake the Spirit; but I deemed I saw
That in the language of his gloomy eye,
That made a falsehood of his augury.
I know that Heaven is true to its great law;
I know how deep and damnable a flaw
Has through its righteous code of truth been rent
By erring swords and hands with blood besprent—
And this it is that fills my soul with awe.

XXIV.

And yet oh God! I dare to ask of thee
  Pardon and palmy days for this dear land;
  The glory of thy sun, thy shadowing hand,
In mercy spread abroad from sea to sea,
That all its wide vast empire so may be,
  From loud Atlantic unto Oregon
  An orb of power, and never to be won
Nor yielded up, a home and fortress to the free!

XXV.

"The past is past!" Wakondah spoke "the past
  Is past: to others lifeless, cold and dumb
  Beyond repeal, I bid it's shadows come
Swiftly before me, nor care I how vast
That which I gendered shall appear at last
  As when at first it's dim colossal form,
  Huge, rude, mis-shapen, noisy as a storm—
Rose up, by me called upward and amassed.

XXVI.

"Falling or rising through the azure air—
Green dells that into silence stretch away;
Ye woods that counterfeit the hues of day
With colors e'en the day could not repair
From his wide fount of morning dyes and fair
Evening or noon; innumerous rampant life
With which this waste or verdant world is rife—
As yet were not; the offspring of a god-like care.

XXVII.

"Oh, backward how that youthful glory gleams—
Ye creatures of my undiminished arm,
When shadowing hills were lifted like a charm,
And at a word their duly measured beams
Sprung to their chambers in the mountain seams.
This was no task-work, nor a toil of joy
Thus an immortal puissance to employ
In building worlds and pouring ocean-streams.

XXVIII.

" Oh ! might and beauty of the forming earth—
Shaped by a hand sufficient and divine,
For such was then Wakondah even thine !—
With hill and mountain masses bursting forth,
And struggling all along the blue-aired North—
With smiling valleys winding far between,
And rivers singing all aloud, though yet unseen:
While I, their sire, hung joyous o'er their birth.

XXIX.

" A fearful and a perilous joy was mine,
When brooding thus above the seething world
I saw the striving giants swiftly hurled,
With thunderous noises to and fro ; a constant line
Of furnaced lightnings, ever forced to shine
Quick, fierce and kindling through the shapeless gloom,
Made the dull void some creature disentomb,
And cheered its birth-pangs with a fire benign.

XXX.

"What voice of portent shook the gulf that held
The uncreated majesty of woods,
The calm deep beauty of the solitudes
Of boundless fields; and from the deep compelled
That Behemoth, whose roar has lately quelled
Nations in panoply of arms arrayed?
Amid the sounding mass and undismayed
By striving rivers, shock of hills impelled

XXXI.

"'Gainst hills and wild beasts raging into light,
Wakondah stood, and o'er the tumult bent,
It's Ruler and it's steadfast firmament.
He breaks the bondage of the cruel Night
That wraps them in its folds, and like a blight
Of storms that rage and thunder but to save
And purify, he burst your rock-ribbed grave—
The matchless Master of redeeming might."—

XXXII.

The Spirit ceased and all along the air,
From where in speechless majesty he stood—
On either hand through all the solitude
Of glittering peaks and dusky vales, to where
The wild beasts held afar their anxious lair—
A sudden silence like a tempest fell;
A silence and a gloom that none can tell—
A calm too dread for mortal things to bear.

XXXIII.

No cloud was on the moon, yet on His brow
A deepening shadow fell, and on his knees
That shook like tempest stricken mountain-trees,
His heavy head descended sad and low:
Like a high city smitten by the blow
That secret earthquakes strike and toppling falls
With all its arches, towers and cathedrals
In swift and unconjectured overthrow.

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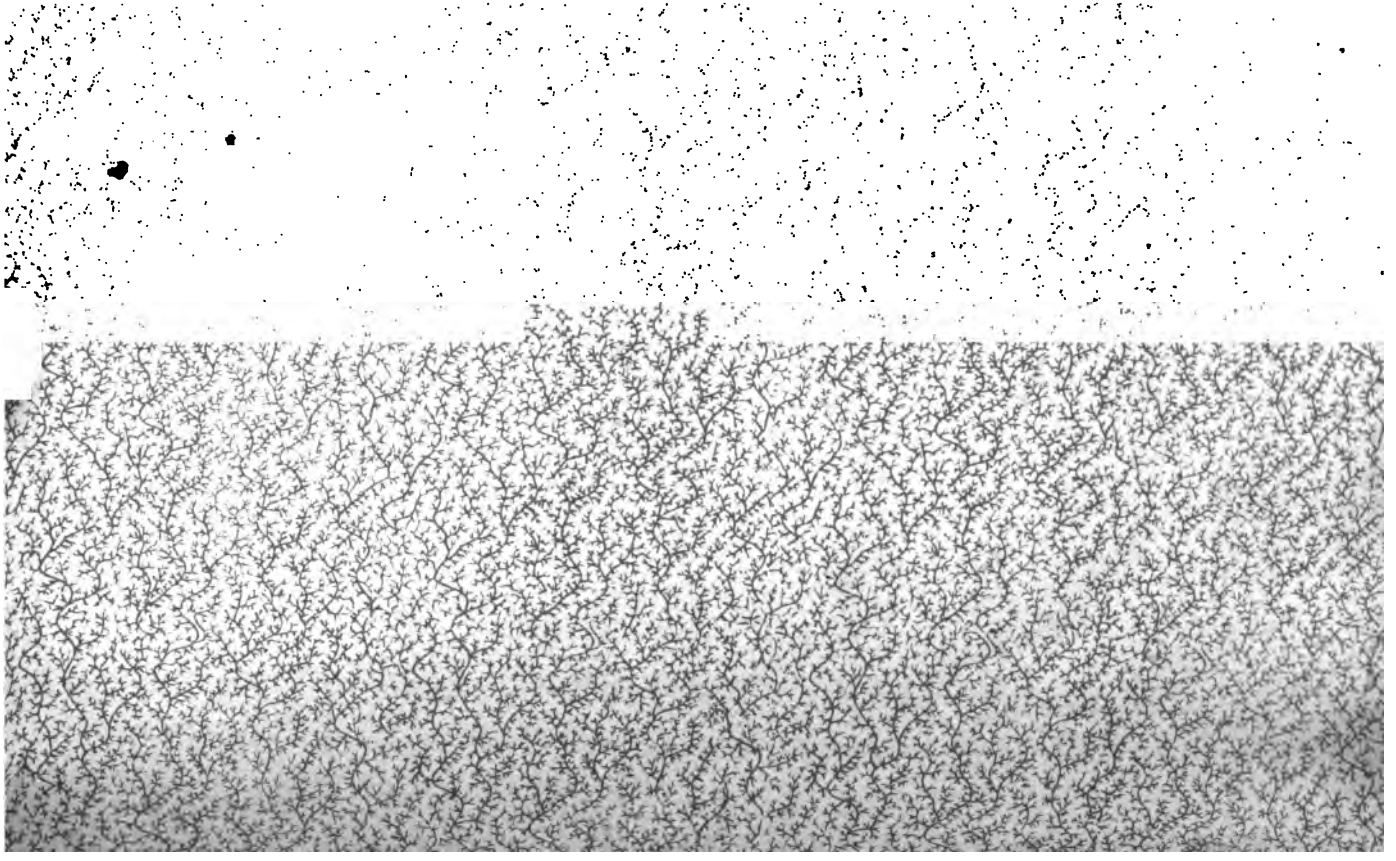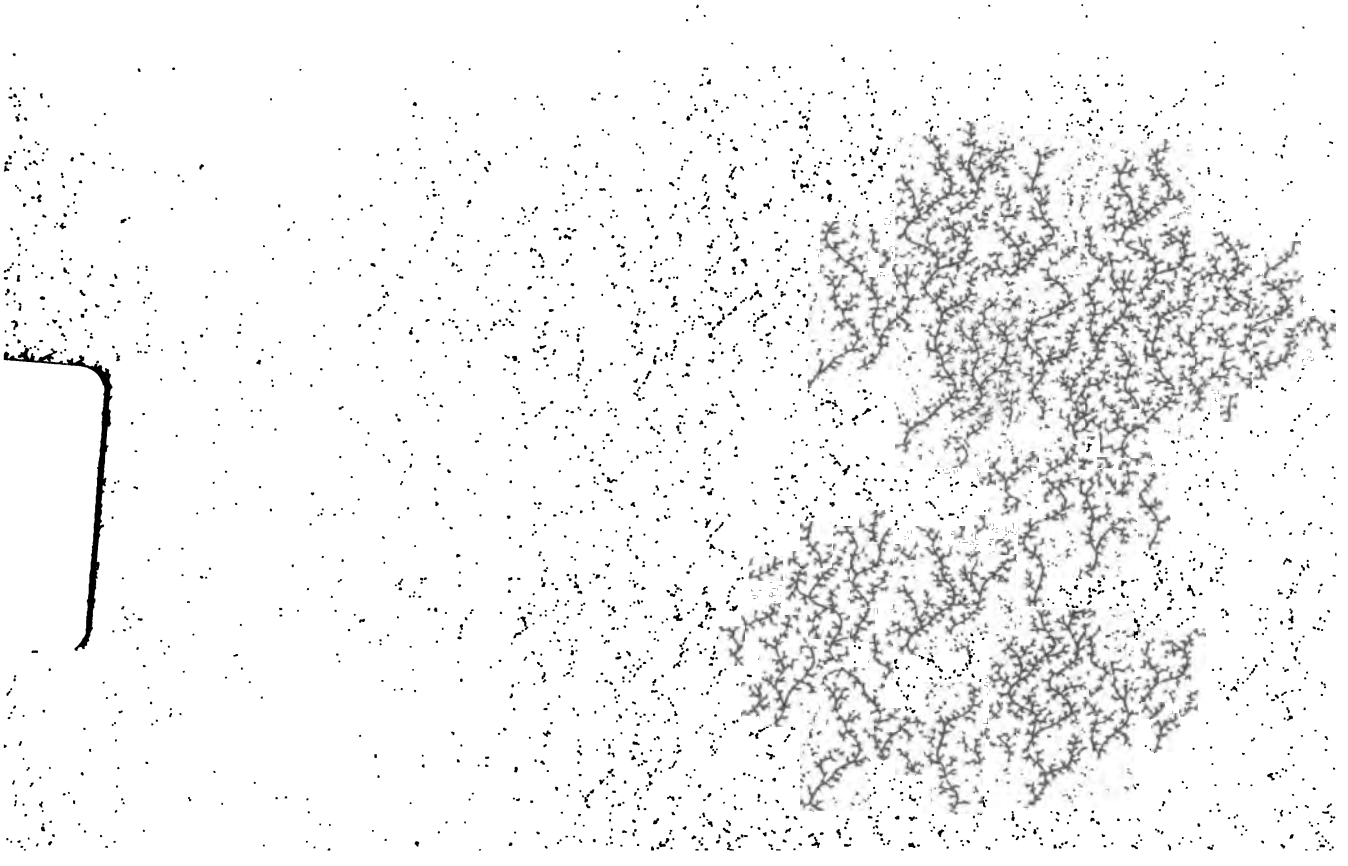
Thenceforth I did not see the Spirit lift
  Again that night his great discrownéd head,
  Nor heard a voice: He was not with the dead,
Nor with the living, for the mighty gift
Of boundless power was passing like a rift
  Of stormy clouds that still will have a tongue
  Ere yet the winds have wafted them along
To endless silence, whitherward they drift.